CHAPTER THREE

HILLS OF HIDDEN MEANING

Choctaw

One Saturday about a dozen years ago, some of my students at the University of Wisconsin walked up and down the wings of a large bird; they looked like barnstormers inching along the wings of old-fashioned biplanes at a county fair. We had to obtain special permission for this exercise, since the bird was frozen in flight within the sequestered compound of the Mendota Mental Health Institute across the lake from our Madison campus.

They were measuring the earthen sculpture of a flying creature that had been shaped from basketfuls of dirt about a thousand years ago by unknown Indians. Now slumped with age and softened by grass, its wingspan, the students finally determined, extended for about 640 feet. Driving about an equal distance to the north would have let them trace a man crafted from mounded earth who, from his feet to his horned headdress, stood more than 200 feet tall. And on a plowed field some fifty-five miles to the west, they could have measured the wings of an even bigger bird that spread for a quarter mile.

The meanings behind the American Indian creations known variously as mounds, *tumuli* or earthworks remain elusive, but their locations are not. Across the eastern half of the United States one can visit the largest collection of sacred constructions produced by any societies in the world. From the Canadian border to the mouth of the Mississippi, from the eastern Plains to the spine of the Appalachians, thousands of American earthworks keep their secrets in our fields, woods and backyards. And they represent a fraction of the many more that have been obliterated by farming, industrial development and urbanization. These American Indian "figured landscapes" represent another kind of symbolized geography,

one that reshaped nature in order to express cosmological beliefs and to choreograph community rituals.

The mounds our students recorded that afternoon belonged to a particular midwestern tradition that has been labeled "effigy mounds." For hundreds of miles all around Madison, across southern Wisconsin, eastern Iowa, eastern Minnesota and northern Illinois, other members of this menagerie still prowl the woods and bluffs: panthers, turtles, bears, wolves, deer and beaver (along with other less decipherable shapes). By constructing these effigy mounds between A.D. 600 and 1100, natives of the American Midwest shaped their environments to reflect their beliefs. Exactly what beliefs remains the big question.

Effigy mounds are best appreciated from a small airplane. Looking down at the bird, panther and bear forms that our students outlined with degradable lime made it easier to understand how the unusual topography of the Madison isthmus, formed by two lakes (Mendota and Menona), almost joined at the waist with fresh streams gushing in from all sides, provided a desirable congregating site for both Late Woodland period Indians and their spirits.

Circling over that big bird, I noticed something else. Under the shelter of its right wing flew a smaller bird, too small for a mate, perhaps an offspring. And alongside it stood a residential treatment unit for the state's most brutalized children—a safe house our students were told to avoid. My imagination conjured up that big flier still meeting some ancient responsibility, protecting its young and ours at the same time.

In Wisconsin alone, claim the state's premier earthwork scholars, Robert Birmingham and Leslie Eisenberg, two to three thousand of these oversized effigies were raised on the land. Often they were just elements within the state's nine hundred mound clusters, in which one might also find older types of conical (often enclosing ritualized burials) and linear (possibly for delineating ceremonial space) earthworks—amounting to more than fifteen thousand mounds all told. And almost invariably they were positioned on prime real estate: river or lake overlooks or hills with great views over the tree canopy of the lakes beyond and approaching storms.

Rather like the method for scarifying the flesh of initiates into secret societies, it is conjectured that the Indians began these mounds with an

incision. Possibly their makers trenched out a "reverse cameo" of the effigy, which for a spell was left naked to the sky, allowing for the rituals that readied its body for new growth. By filling in this outline with excavated or even imported substances—a ceremonial hearth of rocks, perhaps a burial or two, ash and charcoal, and soils that may have been chosen for their color value—what was negative space became positive. Dirt from the immediate surroundings was heaped up and shaped. And as scar tissue heals over and lumps up if ash is rubbed into the cut, so did the mound's form grow into an organic part of the landscape.

Effigy mounds that enclose human burials usually don't contain the sorts of exotic grave offerings associated with high-status individuals. This observation causes some scholars to look elsewhere to explain their significance. Did they represent protective "dream animals" for individuals, as Winnebago Indians suggested to ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore? Were they the insignia or "property marks" of particular totemic clans, as others told anthropologist Paul Radin? Or did they project upon the earth a cosmic social system of which human beings were only a part, or were they "corporate monuments of, for, and to clanship"? Following this line of thought, others propose that the creatures reflect a moiety system of social organization in which all creatures are assigned to either an Earth or Sky division of the universe or imagine them as members of a tripartite cosmos associated with the most appropriate Water, Earth or Sky levels of the world.

Yet another interpretation views mound complexes as spectacular ritual grounds where mortuary ceremonies honored the dead and ensured their continued existence in the hereafter. But they also could have served as immense arenas for resisting the demise of whole societies, especially during those uneasy moments, such as equinoxes or eclipses, when celestial bodies seemed to stand perilously still or even to disappear.

When anthropologist Edmund Carpenter made the case to me that earthworks were indeed ceremonial grounds, he harkened to one of America's most artistically compelling mounds. Located four hundred miles southeast of Madison, just outside Locust Grove, Ohio, the Great Serpent Mound writhes across a velvety green park. Its body is twelve hundred feet long; in its open jaws rests an egglike oval. Traces of two

smaller elevations sticking from the head portion may represent horns, possibly identifying it as the "horned serpent" that figures in stories from a range of tribes. Conceivably, the great snake represented a clan or group ancestor; perhaps renewal ceremonies took place on or around it. Carpenter suggested that social groups might have moved in solemn procession from the serpent's tail until arriving at the head. There the celebrants "reversed" direction—perhaps during a solstice or equinox, when the seasons likewise turned around—and headed downward again, to be symbolically reborn and renewed for another annual cycle.

Proposing mound arrangements as prosceniums for what theater scholar Richard Schechner calls "performances of great magnitude" is reinforced by recent speculations about a second Indian tradition for molding sacred landscapes from the ground. To the southeast of Wisconsin, across five thousand square miles of central Ohio, one finds the remnants of earthen berms, some of them uncommonly large, which are shaped into circles, octagons, squares and long straight lines.

They were constructed between about 200 B.C. and A.D. 400 by an early Indian society we have named after a farmer, Mordecai Cloud Hopewell, whose property first yielded this culture's distinctive burial goods. Most spectacular of the ten thousand mounds produced by Hopewell people are sites that pair circles and squares, a configuration which is repeated in some dozen locations. Of massive size and geometrical precision, a number are still discernible in the midst of contemporary golf courses, county fairgrounds and cemeteries.

Ever since their discovery in the late eighteenth century, these earthworks have sparked outlandish theories. Indians lacked the skills to make them, it was said; they were built by early settlers, lost Phoenicians or Welshmen, wandering Jews or space aliens. More plausible were nineteenth-century speculations that the miles of Hopewellian dirt walls and accompanying moats, especially those that enclosed "citadels" on hilltop sites, served as defensive fortifications. But the case for forts was weakened when the moats proved to lie *inside* the walls, and when archaeologists found little evidence of weaponry, hacked bones or hasty burials.

More likely, according to former National Park Service director Roger

G. Kennedy, to older ceremonial enclosures were added, over time, stone walls and pavements, timber stockades with interwoven branches that helped to heighten the sanctity of what the Greeks called a *temenos,* or ritual enclosure. Expansions of sacred space and zones for ritual practice on an oversized scale are increasingly the interpretative frameworks we hear applied to Hopewell earthworks.

Although scholars have agreed for years that American Indians designed these landscapes, only recently have they realized that their construction was governed by at least two regularities. At sites like Newark, Circleville, High Banks and Seal, Ohio Valley architects, whom Kennedy characterizes as "geomancers," created uniform diameters for their perfect circles at around 1,050 feet. About the same dimensions went for their giant squares, to which the circles were usually attached.

The second regularity came to light when physicists tested the presumed solar alignments of a number of Hopewell sites. The mathematicians learned, instead, that the circles and squares revealed fairly precise lunar observations. Moreover, the Newark site's eight alignments were made throughout the 18.6-year moon cycle, which suggested a well-planned observation program over time.

Further interpretation of the Hopewell circle-and-square configurations remains open. Were they built to metaphorically represent "houses" for different social populations during group rituals, with the circular spaces assigned to locals and their kin and the square shapes allotted to outsiders and potential enemies, with whom, however, one might form marriage alliances? Or were the rites that took place within these paired geometrical precincts complementary and conducted by different social halves, or moieties, *within* the community? And is it possible that these forms are grandiose precursors of the more modest, summer-use "square grounds" and winter-use circular "town houses," which stood side by side in southeastern Indian villages during the later historic period, and for which we have rich documentation?

More grounded, however, is another thesis regarding Hopewell sacred geography. About ten years ago, Dr. Bradley Lepper, an archaeologist with the Ohio Historical Society, began to speculate, from clues on neglected nineteenth-century maps, that the ceremonies of the Hopewell people

took place not only in and around specific circle-and-square sites, but also *between* them.

Looking for likely arteries between these constructions, Lepper focused on one that he called the Great Hopewell Road. It ran for about sixty miles, roughly paralleled the Scioto River, and linked the prominent monuments of Newark in the north and Chillicothe to the south. Lepper's research into early cartography that depicted the Hopewell mounds also revealed "alleys" or "avenues" created by earthen walls. At the Portsmouth site, for instance, near the mound of the Scioto River, parallel embankments extended from a series of crescents and circles across the Ohio River and into Kentucky for about twenty miles. Might these have been part of a well-organized Hopewellian "public works" project? But the extensions that particularly caught Lepper's eye were a six-mile stretch that ran south of the Newark site, and early mention of an additional twenty-four-mile segment.

But a third regularity that Lepper now identified was the fairly constant two-hundred-foot interval between the borders of this "road"—about the width of a six-lane freeway, which he now called the Hopewellian Sacred Way. At intervals along this arrow-straight route he discovered other earth-made features, which conceivably could have served as wayside shrines, much like the *heraduras* known to religious pilgrims in Spain, where pilgrims rest or perform rites along their symbolic journeys.

Confirmation of this sixty-mile *via sacra* awaits further investigation. But scholars have postulated that these earthworks and the possible roads connecting them orchestrated formal ways for entire communities or social groups to transport supplies and tribute. Or they served as thoroughfares for exchanges between sacred centers of nonmaterial goods: symbols, ritual communications or wives. And perhaps they were also pathways for those "performances of great magnitude" in which entire communities celebrated the demise of leaders, or the movements of celestial or cosmic forces, in order to secure seasonal fertility for their gardens.

Less mystery and fewer questions are attached to a third earthwork tradition that covers the greatest geographical range of them all. Up and down America's midsection one can visit the remains of "platform mounds," which supported chiefly residences and "sacred fire" temples at-

tended by priesthoods. Some were built during Late Woodland times. But most were arranged around geometric plazas to create "rurban" centers (communities that blend the features of the rural and urban) during the burst of cultural growth that lasted from A.D. 800 to 1200 and is known as the Mississippian Tradition. These mounds enclosed burials, allowed leaders to gaze down upon the throng and elevated priests closer to their principal deity, the sun.

Settlements that reflect this general Mississippian civic plan are so widespread that I could visit the remains of one of their earliest town squares in southern Wisconsin and then take a three-day drive to the last of them to survive, about fourteen hundred miles to the south, near the Gulf of Mexico. But in another example of early scholarly reluctance to credit North American Indians with sophisticated lifestyles, that northern outpost was not attributed to them initially. The fortified Wisconsin site we know as Aztalan was named because it was considered the limit of Aztec expansion. Enamored of Baron Alexander von Humboldt's theory of a correspondence between Mexican Aztec pyramids and North American mounds, an amateur archaeologist named Nathaniel F. Hyer adopted the nobleman's title for a mythical Mexican homeland that was said to lie somewhere to the north.

Situated alongside Wisconsin's Crawfish River, at the outpost Hyer called Aztalan you can conjure up a detachment of Indians dispatched to thankless duty on the Mississippian world's frozen frontier. This image is partly supported by the fact that in its heyday, around A.D. 1300, the twenty-one acres that compose Aztalan were surrounded by a stockade made of upright logs that were probably interwoven with saplings, then plastered with clay. At intervals of about eighty feet stood log watchtowers. What were they afraid of? is a question often asked. But one might also wonder, what were they protecting? What were the key symbols that were so important to this community, and which differentiated it from a transitory hunting camp?

Part of an answer may be found in Aztalan's principal flat-topped mounds, which archaeologists tell us were raised layer by layer over successive years, and part may lie in the conical-mound burial of a well-to-do Aztalan woman, whose body was wrapped in a mortuary shroud sewn

from nearly two thousand perforated shell beads. For if you head south, to the site that has been labeled the "Leviathan" of Mississippian culture, you find similar examples of both multiple-staged building projects and high-status burials in abundance.

Comparisons may be odious, as Cervantes wrote, but when it comes to impressing Americans with the largest civic footprint that any Indian culture has imposed on North America, it is hard to resist them. I am referring to Cahokia, a Mississippian metropolis of roughly twenty thousand native citizens that thrived a thousand years ago on about six square miles of an East St. Louis suburb in southwestern Illinois. It was named by early French visitors after a subtribe of the local Illini Indian tribe, whom they found living in the vicinity in the late 1600s. Cahokia generates a stream of comparisons and analogies because, I suspect, we have no alternative when filling the void of what we can learn about a place of such overwhelming significance in its day. This is true of other archaeological sites, but it is especially maddening to think of all we will never know about Cahokian society—the tangle of kinship allegiances, religious pomp and devotion, sociopolitical commitments, key personalities and subsistence habits that mobilized an Indian citizenry to develop this spot as their religious capital for three times as long as the United States has claimed sovereignty over North America.

Cahokia was probably the Mississippian world's economic hub and spiritual nerve center. Its estimated 120 earthen mounds required the digging, loading, transporting and dumping of an estimated 50 million cubic feet of earth that were carried by laborers in baskets that weighed up to 60 pounds each. The city's size rivaled that of Paris in the same period. The major, central mound was the largest precontact earthwork in North America; its scale surpasses that of Egypt's Great Pyramid. Its 21 million cubic feet of earth are the equivalent of six of today's oil tankers. Erected in fourteen stages over about three hundred years (circa A.D. 900 to 1200), eventually it stood as tall as a ten-story building, on a base that was larger than a modern New York City block, and supported a wooden temple or royal residence on its summit that ran more than a hundred feet long.

Within Cahokia's city limits thrived a population twice as dense as that of Los Angeles County. The two-mile-long stockade protecting its sacred precinct was reconstructed four times and required, all told, an estimated eighty thousand logs. Cahokia's five circles of large, evenly spaced upright skinned trees, known as woodhenges, probably served as solar horizon calendars that marked solstices, equinoxes and the proper times for planting and harvesting corn, and possibly they functioned to align new earthworks as well.

Among the three hundred burials found within one ridge-top mound at Cahokia was a high-status male laid out on a blanket woven with more than twenty thousand marine shell beads; beside him lay copper from the Great Lakes, mica from the southern Appalachian Mountains, and seven hundred freshly chipped arrow points, presumably for use in the afterlife. Although this dignitary was interred in the mid-tenth century, Indians would return to Cahokia to bury their dead in her mounds until 1700. In 1989, Cahokia was recognized as one of only three archaeological sites in the United States to enjoy recognition as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. It is the largest and longest-lasting sacred landscape that was created by human hands north of Mexico, and we will never know its original name.

To the south, however, we can fill in some of the gap between an overload of measurements about these mounded landscapes and our inability to know how human beings used them. Not all the tribes of this Mississippian culture dispersed after the droughts, overpopulation and depletion of natural resources that saw most of them abandon the sprawling middle-western plain known as the American Bottom in the mid-thirteenth century. Many of the survivors reconstituted themselves into the historical tribes we still recognize today: Cherokee, Choctaw, Creeks and the others encountered by Hernando de Soto in 1540.

But at least one pocket of mound-building and sun-worshipping Mississippians survived. Along the lower Mississippi River, not far from the subtropical habitat where marking the landscape with earthworks fifteen centuries earlier reached epic proportions at a site called Poverty Point, a

chiefdom of nine towns continued to maintain a remarkably intact way of life right into the eighteenth century. We know them as the Natchez.

When French missionaries first arrived in Louisiana and visited the wattle-and-daub cabins and formal plazas of the Natchez in spring 1700, they saw priests and nobles who could have stepped out of the pictures engraved into the famous Black Drink cups that were fashioned from large Gulf of Mexico conch shells and which were uncovered by Harvard University from the Mississippian-period mounds of Spiro in eastern Oklahoma. Resplendent in full-body tattoos, copper jewelry, turkey-feather capes and headdresses, they descended the stepped ramps of low earthworks to show the foreigners around town.

Our ability to visualize flesh-and-blood Natchez coexisting with their temple mounds is a result of the two-volume *Histoire de la Louisiane*, which was written and illustrated by a Dutch-born engineer named Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz. As is the case with many Euro-Americans who have written about American Indians over the centuries, Le Page du Pratz had his unsung native collaborator, a nobleman by the name of *Olabalkebiche*, or "Tattooed Serpent." As principal war chief, he held a position that was second only to that of his eldest brother, the nation's overlord. The insult of being temporarily held captive by the French in 1716 did not harden Tattooed Serpent against them; for nine years his diplomacy helped to keep the lid on degenerating relations between the two peoples.

In early 1720, two years after Le Page du Pratz first landed at Mobile Bay, he moved to southeastern Mississippi and purchased from the Natchez a cabin, four hundred acres of tobacco fields and some slaves. Among them was a Chitimacha Indian woman, perhaps stolen in war, who became his ward and possibly his mistress. He met her friends, became conversant in Natchez and close friends with Tattooed Serpent.

During four years of relative peace, Tattooed Serpent invited the Frenchman to sacred pipe ceremonies, showed him the community's holy Osage orange tree and explained his people's unusual social system. And forty years after the death of the French Sun King back in Versailles, Le Page du Pratz enjoyed an audience with Tattooed Serpent's eldest sibling, the Natchez high chief who was known as the Great Sun.

Thanks to Le Page du Pratz's writings on the tribe, later anthropology would add a new form of social stratification to the world's roster of how humans organize ourselves. At the apex was the Great Sun himself as well as his select group of wives and immediate relatives. Next came the tier of high nobles, followed by lesser nobles, or "honored men," under whom stood commoners, who were known as Stinkards, and finally slaves, who were usually prisoners of war. What was unique about the Natchez class system, however, was its method of self-perpetuation. Upper-crust males *had* to "marry down," choosing mates from the Stinkard class. Since inheritance was through the female line, only certain offspring of mixed-class marriages might rise on the social ladder.

Mounds were an apt metaphor for this hierarchical structure. Wearing his swan-feather crown and borne by slaves on a litter, (his moccasins only allowed to touch woven mats), the Great Sun greeted *his* elder brother in the sky from the mound's summit every morning, whose elevation, it was said, enabled them to converse more easily. Balancing his divine power base was that of the priesthood, who occupied the community's other highest mound. After Le Page du Pratz gained Tattooed Serpent's confidence, he was led up to the fire temple mound at their Grand Village, near St. Catherine's Creek, a tributary of the Lower Mississippi. From the temple guardian he recorded the Natchez creation myth and the meanings of the sacred flame.

One can only imagine the pride with which Tattooed Serpent probably escorted Le Page du Pratz to another earthwork, only recently abandoned by his forebears. But it would have been hard for any of the French to miss Emerald Mound. Today one locates it about ten miles north of the present-day town of Natchez, near the beginning of the old Indian trade route that connected many river-bottom tribes to the faraway Tennessee Valley and that whites would transform into the Natchez Trace.

Some time after A.D. 1300, the Natchez took a second look at the promising hillock and saw an opportunity to improve on nature. Conscripting what had to have been many work gangs, the Natchez supervisors reshaped, graded and smoothened the natural loess into a raised plaza that ran for nearly 800 feet in length and a little over 230 feet in

width—larger than two football fields. After the much earlier Poverty Point and Cahokia's central mound, the 35-foot-high Emerald complex—which Park Service director Kennedy once described in its present-day state as "untended, unexplained but astounding"—represents the third largest religious structure in North America.

At both ends of Emerald's eight-acre elevated platform, two additional temple mounds, sizable in their own right, were superimposed. Climbing up their ramped stairways, priests and ritual participants were lifted above the tree cover; in the distance they could even catch sight of the Mississippi. One of these constructions probably supported a temple with a sacred fire and attendants; the other perhaps housed the community's chieftain. While the compound was under construction and in use, between 1300 and 1600, the surrounding fields supported corn, beans and pumpkins.

The French honeymoon with the Natchez lasted less than four years. With a sinking heart, Le Page du Pratz watched his countrymen, clustered around Fort Rosalie on the bluffs of the Mississippi, attack his Indian friends in 1724. One year later, on June 1, 1725, illness overtook Tattooed Serpent. The funerary lamentations were overwhelming, as if his passing foreshadowed that of his nation. It was then that Le Page du Pratz watched what was possibly the last internment of a dignitary in an American Indian earthwork.

Four years later, as French encroachment on Natchez lands and rights reached the breaking point, the Great Sun led his Natchez warriors against them. Caught by surprise, Fort Rosalie was destroyed and hundreds were killed or captured. In furious retaliation, the French slaughtered most of the tribe. Within two years the Natchez as a people were no more.

Some Natchez escapees were harbored by the Chickasaw; others found shelter among Creeks and Cherokee. To their hosts, wrote anthropologist James Mooney, the Natchez were a breed apart, regarded with awe, "a race of wizards and conjurors." And as custodians of ancient knowledge, they led dances and brewed medicines. From an estimated population of at least four thousand in 1650, no full-blood Natchez were left by 1940, and only two individuals could still speak the language.

No American Indians construct full-size earth mounds today, but one tribe lives in the shadow of an earthwork that played a role in their history. To find them, you must leave Tattooed Serpent's burial mound in the Grand Village and head about 160 miles up the Natchez Trace. In the 1830s, with the encouragement of President Andrew Jackson, the U.S. government ordered the wholesale removal of the Choctaw tribe to new lands in the southern portion of Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. But some Choctaw escaped removal and now live on reservations in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Their cabins cluster near a Woodland period mound known as Nanih Waiya, which means "Leaning Mountain." When I scouted for the place, I got lost among Winston County's narrow, sandy lanes, which cut through thick underbrush. Ten miles southeast of the town of Noxapater (meaning "Dark Father") were warning signs that recent flooding had damaged the bridge across Nanih Waiya Creek. After pulling onto an unpaved driveway, I rapped on the door of a wooden house whose right wall was sinking into runny red dirt. The musical sounds of an unfamiliar language—Choctaw—went silent inside. Two men with bare feet and wearing coveralls stiff with motor oil stared at me, then broke into toothy grins when I leaned against the doorjamb in despair.

Once I'd followed their directions to the detour, the well-groomed mound was easy to find. Maintained by the state of Mississippi as a recreational rather than a historical or archaeological site, it abuts a rural mail route and adjoins a small park where non-Indians book their family-reunion picnics. The earthwork also stands only twenty miles from the hub of Mississippi Choctaw life, in Philadelphia, Mississippi. But local Indians visit the site only periodically, I was told, still wary of pickups bearing loaded-gun racks that seemed to materialize whenever unfamiliar dark faces showed up.

To the Choctaw, the earthwork is still gendered as "Great Mother." A wooden staircase leads twenty-two feet to the flattened summit. From there the glassy bayou waters reflect the splayed trunks of towering cypress and drooping foliage. The mound is not far from the merging of five

streams into the Pearl River, which drains the length of the lower Mississippi Valley before it empties near New Orleans. Until recently, white farmers cultivated the mound nearly up to the summit. Still surrounded by a patchwork of cornfields, one sees only an amputated remnant of its former glory, when, shortly after the time of Christ, it overlooked an ensemble of plazas, mounds, moats and walls that extended for two miles.

In October 1540, Hernando de Soto's caravan of clanking wagons passed a hundred miles northeast of the Great Mother. He burned down a nearby Choctaw village and executed a thousand residents. By then the mound had already been abandoned. The chronicler who first noted its spiritual importance was an Irish trader named James Adair. In the late 1760s he ascended a structure he called *Nan-be Y-a,* the "Divine Hill, or Mount of God."

According to the Choctaw, the mound marked the end of a legendary migration. At one time they had lived to the northwest, but population growth, scarcity of game or weak soil forced them to find new homes. Magical staff in hand, a man named Chahta led the migrants. Each night he stuck his pole in the ground; each morning he inspected it. Whatever direction it leaned, that way they headed.

For many months they traveled. One night, on a creek's western bank, Chahta planted his pole and a heavy rain commenced. The next day, reports this version of the Choctaw migration narrative, "the staff had burrowed itself deeper in the ground and stood straight and tall." Chahta proclaimed that the long-sought land of Nanih Waiya had been found. "Here we would build our homes and a mound as the sacred burial spot for our ancestors."

Some accounts have the Choctaw bearing a portable ossuary that contained the bones of important ancestors; perhaps they were the first to be interred in Nanih Waiya. Europeans were fascinated by descriptions of Choctaw "bone pickers," whose six-inch fingernails cleaned the meat off rotting corpses to preserve their bones. Other stories tell of superhuman inhabitants who were already living in the mound's vicinity and who soon perished from disease. And one also hears that the Choctaw migrants were led instead by two brothers, whose disagreement in the new land splintered the arrivals into the separate tribes we know as the Chickasaw and Choctaw.

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If only Choctaw stories ended there, but oral traditions are rarely tidy and uniform. For a second group of Choctaw narratives link Nanih Waiya to a different creation scenario. In an account narrated by Choctaw who were living in Louisiana in the 1930s, what was a man-made "mound" in the other stories becomes a natural "hill." Their narrative follows:

> In very ancient times, before men lived on earth, the hill was formed and from the topmost point a passage led down deep into the bosom of the earth. Later, when birds and animals lived, and the surface of the earth was covered with trees and plants of many sorts, and lakes and rivers had been formed, the Choctaw came forth through the passageway in *Nane chacha* [Nanih Waiya]. And from that point they scattered in all directions but ever afterwards remembered the hill from the summit of which they first beheld the light of the sun.

Some twists on this second story line describe all the major southeastern tribes—Creeks, Cherokee and Chickasaw as well as Choctaw—emerging from this passageway. Like a newly born just out of a womb, their skins are damp with a protective film. Before heading for their destined homelands, they dry themselves on the hill's body. All but the Choctaw go elsewhere; their Mother mound says they must never leave her side.

Sometimes the inconsistencies of Indian chronicles hide deeper truths and subtler realities. Inside the caretaker's cabin near the picnic tables at Nanih Waiya park, I examined a hand-drawn map that provided directions to a *second site,* which is also named Nanih Waiya and lies about a mile and a half to the northeast. It was described as the "cave mound," to distinguish it from the "temple mound." Was this the location associated with the Creation myth of Choctaw origins, whereas the man-made mound only a few yards away was the site emphasized in their migration scenario?

One way to untangle the relationship between the two sites is to ask whether other aspects of Choctaw culture history reflect similar paradoxes and oscillations of identity. Names are a place to start. Although one finds general agreement that *nanih* means "mountain," interpretations of *waiya*

conform to the different associations suggested by the two scenarios. To Choctaw scholar Muriel H. Wright, it meant "to produce," with the site's name translating as "mountain that produces." To others it meant "leaning," referring to the version of the migratory story of the leaning pole.

For the Choctaw of historical times, we have some evidence that the man-made mound had come to symbolize the bosom of their homeland, or as Choctaw writer Charles Roberts put it, "the center of the Choctaw universe." Faced with pressures to remove from the area, it was here at the old Nanih Waiya monument that the half-French, half-Choctaw leader named Greenwood LeFlore convened a grand council in 1828. Eventually the Choctaw signed the controversial Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which tossed most of the tribe on the road again. A glimpse of the emotional toll of this eviction comes from Choctaw writer W.E.S. Folsom-Dickerson. In his village the women "did not weep or mourn openly." But on the day of their departure, they "walked through their own beloved forests of oak and elm for the last time, and touched ever so gently the leaves of those trees which had sheltered them and their people for generations."

As for the Choctaw left behind in the vicinity of what they called "our good old mother mound," fewer than three hundred of them received any lands through the Dancing Rabbit Creek Treaty. On all sides they were hemmed in by white squatters who refused to move. After whites established the town of Philadelphia in the 1830s on the former Choctaw village location called Bull Frog Place, Indians were even less welcome. Some families quit the area to join fellow Choctaw in Oklahoma, where, out of nostalgia, they named their first tribal capital Nanih Waiya. By the turn of the century not more than fifteen hundred Choctaw remained in Mississippi.

With the clear-cutting of their old forests, including the Nanih Waiya tract, the holdouts had no choice but to find work as landless sharecroppers in cotton fields. When the influenza epidemic of 1918 swept the South, impoverished Choctaw were especially vulnerable. A federal delegation investigating their plight found most of the remnant Choctaw living illegally near the Nanih Waiya mound, "clinging hopefully," as a visiting folklorist put it, "to the legendary promise of protection."

To reach the second Nanih Waiya location, the so-called cave mound, I sought help from Kenneth H. Carleton, the tribe's archaeologist, whose analyses of Choctaw pottery had strengthened the theory that it was actually at least three earlier ethnic groups who had incorporated over time to create the sizable and powerful historic Choctaw of the late seventeenth century. Though a Winston County native, Carleton, like many locals, had never laid eyes on the less visited cave-mound site.

At the end of a gravel road, surrounded by pools of standing water, we saw the forested hillock. It was midwinter, and the gentle slope was carpeted with brown and yellow leaves. On its northern flank, the mound curved inward toward a soft dent in which lay a perfectly round opening about the size of a manhole cover. A damp, mossy rim softened the aperture that angled downward like a road culvert. The orifice seemed to incarnate the great womb caves of Meso-America, from which emerged new tribes like the Chocho and Chichimec.

With Ken's grip on my belt, I lay on the ground and dropped my torso into the darkness. Cool drafts swept up at me, smelling earthy, fresh and damp. From the blackness of a hollow chamber far below came a gurgling echo, as if seeps were dripping into a subterranean pool. It was hard not to imagine that what pressed upon my body and breathed back at me was some sort of living thing.

CHAPTER FOUR

BETWEEN RIVER AND FIRE

Cherokee

The ancient Romans recognized two kinds of sacred places. First were *loca sacra,* which meant sites that were turned over to religious use through human acts of consecration and dedication to ritual practice, places such as temples, graveyards and arenas for sacred dance. Second were *loca religiosa,* which referred to the locations that were revealed to be intrinsically holy or endowed with invisible powers through the miraculous events that took place there.

Sacred places of the old-time Cherokee of the Little Tennessee River region, located along today's states of North Carolina and Tennessee, suggest a similar distinction. Out in the mountains, forests and rivers were their *loca religiosa,* or places associated with the characters of mythology and magical forces. Within their well-organized towns were the *loca sacra,* the rectilinear plazas and round council houses where rules and ceremonies controlled the power emanating from sacred fires.

One goal of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 was to protect both kinds of sites. But the first challenge to the act concerned a threat to drown every kind of Cherokee place, sacred or secular. A dam was being constructed over the Little Tennessee River near the North Carolina-Tennessee state line. No longer heralded as part of the 1930s crusade for providing electrification and flood control for rural poor, the Tellico Dam project was blatantly geared for the tourist industry. Along with creating a recreational lake, the ensuing spread of backed-up water would inundate a thirty-three-mile stretch of riverbank that supported a series of historic Cherokee town sites. Paramount among them was the principal "Peace" capital of Chota, the tribe's equivalent to colonial Williamsburg or Philadelphia. It would also flood much of the surrounding countryside.

Although the Cherokee had been removed from the valley for centuries, some traditional people among the tribe's eastern groups, who had successfully resisted being removed to Oklahoma in the nineteenth century, now fought against destruction of their ancestral lands.

The homeland of the Overhill Cherokee is found in Swain, Latour and Monroe counties in eastern Tennessee, just "over the hills" of the Great Smokies. Geologically this portion of the Southern Appalachians consists of the oldest mountains in North America. The lifeline for the cluster of Overhill towns was the Little Tennessee River, a stream which the Cherokee knew as *Yunwi Gamahida*, the "Long Man," a living being who granted energy and spoke to those who knew how to listen. This river was born more than two hundred million years ago. After the earth's crust buckled into mountains, it swelled from rain runoff in the Blue Ridge highlands and gathered speed as the waters cascaded down the northwestern slopes. Relaxing once it had achieved the valley floor, the Little Tennessee sashayed back and forth across the Tellico Plains. Every year its expansion and contraction left whiplash shadows of dried meanders as it fertilized the flood plain before merging into the greater Tennessee River just west of present-day Knoxville.

The valley drew generations of Native Americans. For at least nine thousand years they hunted, fished, foraged, gardened, built houses, raised children and transacted with spirits here. This tenancy reached a peak of sorts in the mid-eighteenth century with a string of nine Cherokee Indian towns that extended from Citico, nearest the eastern mountain range, to Tuskegee, close to the mouth of the Tellico River. Until the fall of 1979, one could raft its length and see on the southeastern shore the grassy hummocks that once supported temples and enclosed noble burials.

After the first flowers bloomed here ninety-five million years ago, the region became a botanical repository; in mountains surrounding the Little Tennessee Valley thrived the largest inventory of plants in North America. To the Cherokee hardly a cleft in the hills or a crook in the river was without its spirit (plant) occupant; a test for their healers and shamans was the extent of their knowledge of how to find and use them.

In early spring a few years ago, I drove through the tunnel of trees that

shroud Route 129 from Robbinsville, North Carolina, and arrived at a memorial to the old town of Chota on the Bacon Bend of the river. Dusk glowed pinkly to the west, what the Cherokee called "the darkening land," the direction they associated with blood, power, success. Southeastward loomed the front ridge of what they described as the "wave upon wave" of the Great Smokies. Swathed in the bluish gauze of the largest mountain chain east of the Mississippi, the summits and slopes, forests, dells and rivers of those mountains were inhabited, they believed, by all sorts of spirit beings, some hospitable, others up to no good.

Through the Stony Grave Gap of Chilhowee Mountain I could still make out Thunderbird Peak, which stood at more than fifty-five hundred feet. And I was aware that another sixteen miles due east lay Clingman's Dome, the crown of the Southern Appalachians, its summit lifting yet another thousand feet. "Peak," "mountain" and "crown"—the vigor of those alpine terms seem ill fitting for this rounded, well-worn skyline. I appreciated why locals, whose cabins nestled in valley "coves," preferred the words "knob" or "bald," as if respecting the aged personalities of mountains that have seen it all.

According to Cherokee tradition, many of these mountaintop "balds" were considered to be "town houses" for the animal kingdom—circular structures that were identical to the council houses where the Cherokee met in communities like Chota. The story goes that when the animals became furious that Indian hunters were eating their flesh and stripping their fur without due respect, their "tribes" convened in these mountaintop buildings. First gathered the Deer. The Bears met at "The Mulberry Place," near Clingman's Dome. On Gregory Bald, in North Carolina's Swain County, the Rabbits discussed revenge. Then the Deer sent rheumatism, the Fishes and Snakes unleashed bad dreams. Each species retaliated against humans with their trademark malaise.

But the plant world befriended people. As if as one, the trees, shrubs, herbs, grasses and moss spoke up: "I shall appear to help man when he calls upon me." That assistance came in the form of "medicine," the Cherokee antidote to every misfortune. Under the principle of reciprocity that governed Cherokee life, it became the job of trained conjurers,

schooled in identifying hundreds of plants, to match animal-derived ailments with their wild plant cures.

Some were helpful personalities in their own right: Little Man, the beneficial ginseng; Talker, the bugle weed, which, when rubbed on their lips, made children eloquent; Fire Maker, the sticks of fleabane used in fire-by-friction techniques; and White Man's Footsteps, the white clover that always cropped up in the wake of Europeans. Within most Overhill towns were native herbalists who could "converse" with more than eight hundred separate plants, who knew which bled, bore scars and needed recuperation when their roots, bark, buds, leaves or shoots were harvested for concocting cures.

Living within these woods were other places and beings who helped those who behaved properly. South of the Oconaluftee River's headwaters lay a lake whose waters were the yellowish color of gall. To casual visitors, it looked like any highland bog; to respectful hunters who chanted and fasted, it became a clear, deep lake with flocks of ducks and pigeons.

Every Cherokee was aware that Little People inhabited rocky cliffs and gorges like the Nantahala and Tullugh. They knew that Thunder Beings traveled from bald to bald by means of invisible bridges. They were taught that Rabbit spirits burrowed within broom sage on hillsides, that Fish beings were found along river bends under the shadows of drooping hemlock, that Whirlwind spirits hovered in leafy treetops and that any of these mountains might hold the game that was dispensed by the mythic master hunter Kanati.

Also in the landscape lay powers for the mind and spirit, especially on nights slashed by lightning, when medicine makers sought it face-to-face. "If you want to know how long you'll live," confided one, "the conjure man will take you out on a night with an electric storm and strip you to your loincloth, and run you through some trees. The number of trees you run through is the number of years you'll live. . . . Lightning will part the trees for you, but just the right number of them." For the Cherokee, lightning was a positive power. Trees struck by it were sought after so that shamans could bury their blackened splinters in cornfields to assure healthy crops. Warriors and ballplayers rubbed the charred wood on their biceps and

calves for strength. Everyone knew they were charged with "You, Ancient One," bolts of sacred fire from the sky.

The hills and streams around the Little Tennessee also harbored less benign spirits. To the west of the river, near Culhowee, the Thunderers holed up in a deep ravine; every spring one heard their resounding drums. In the inky darkness of Nantahala Pass lay the hunting grounds of Spearfinger, a man-eating ogress. In a pool about twenty-five miles downstream from Chota swam the Dakwa, a monstrous, sharp-toothed fish. Four miles above present-day Bryson City, a fearsome water serpent, the Uktena, left its crawling marks in the river bottom. Along the Cheoah River, just below Rock Creek Knob, an underwater buffalo caused a ravenous eddy. Above Caney Fork lived an unfriendly giant named Judaculla. The ominous lights that drifted up the hollows near Quallah were evidence of Rattlesnake's home. And just south of Chota, at the mouth of Hiwassee River, a red-and-white-banded leech who was as large as a house churned the waters into a cauldron.

Early Euro-American visitors were of two minds about this teeming vegetation, which matted hillsides, hid ankle-twisting obstacles, buried streams, and where venturing fifty feet into the woods could leave a tenderfoot tattered and disoriented. "I've been in Hell," stammered a mid-eighteenth-century white hunter, whom we know only as Jeffrey, when he emerged near Chota after days in the brush. That demonizing epithet would be hurled at the Blue Ridge wilderness more than once. But to naturalist William Bartram, exploring the same valley at roughly the same time, it felt like Eden before the Fall. Bartram sauntered down the Little Tennessee Valley, intoxicated by its "meandering river gliding through, saluting in its various turning the swelling, green, turfy knolls, embellished with parterres of flowers and fruitful strawberry beds."

Where rivers were concerned, the Overhill Cherokee also held two views. From what we might call a navigational perspective, they knew the Little Tennessee as the Pine River, one of a number of streams that drained into the Tennessee River. Paralleling its banks were trails by which they pursued whitetail deer, spied on enemies, gathered medicines and col-

lected the cobbles to pave their plazas. This aspect of the river was eminently practical. It routed how the Cherokee got from here to there and where they might find useful things along the way.

Yet the early British trader James Adair noticed that the Cherokee seemed "strongly attached to their rivers, all retaining the opinion of the ancients that rivers are necessary to constitute a paradise." The Little Tennessee was personified as a willful but benevolent superspirit named "the Long Man," whose head rested near the Great Smokies and legs extended downstream until his toes touched the Tennessee River. The Long Man was said to "bear down" on all in his path, and his hand "held all Cherokee lives." Only initiated singers could translate into human speech the murmuring of his cataracts.

For Cherokee who bathed in his body, who drank from him and invoked his curative powers, the Long Man always helped them out. For the first two years of their lives, Cherokee children were washed in its waters each morning. Into historic times, when medicinal incantations written on bark or paper in the Cherokee syllabary lost their effectiveness upon their owner's death, dunking the written scripts in this living river restored their potency.

At every critical turn in a man's life, the river's blessings were imparted through the "going to the water" rite, which required prayers that were lent spiritual force with "new water" from free-flowing streams. Only those waters were ladled for the Black Drink emetic, and preferably in autumn, when the distillate of falling leaves made them most potent. The Cherokee spooned the river waters over their heads, limbs and torsos or plunged in whenever they could.

Whenever shamans fought disease, during birth and death rituals, prior to all hunts, war parties and ball games, before eating the powerful first corn of the season, to avert threats foretold in dreams, or upon greeting a new spring moon, the Cherokee fasted all night and then "went to the water." It was best to visit the river at dawn, when the rays of the sun were purest and strongest. It was best to visit bends in the stream in the company of a shaman, who would douse his patients four or seven times and chant with each immersion:

O Long Man at rest. O helper of men, you let nothing slip from your grasp. You never let the soul slip from your grasp. Come now and take a firmer grasp. I originated near the cataract, and from there await me on the road. Now my soul stands erect in the seventh heaven.

As for the *loca sacra* category of sacred place, no Cherokee site epitomized it more than *Itsa'ti*, or Chota, which was the capital town for the entire Little Tennessee Valley. After construction of Tellico Dam, a memorial was erected where it had stood. Located on a man-made jetty that juts into the swollen reservoir about twenty-five miles south of the dam, the monument consists of eight squat pillars within a twenty-foot-wide concrete curb. Constructed in 1985, it lies twenty feet over the site of the actual "town house" that had once served as the Overhill Cherokee's Supreme Court, House of Representatives and White House wrapped into one.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the reputation of Chota as a civic center had spread through the word of travelers and written documents by European and American diplomats, traders, missionaries and travelers. It was the Cherokee Nation's "Imperial City," their "Washington and also their Rome," and their "Beloved Town, where the fire of Peace is always burning." To Cherokee, the town was addressed more affectionately as Grandmother. The council house, which is lost today under impounded water and riprap, held sway over about sixty acres of public plazas and thatch-roofed dwellings and a patchwork of gardens along the bottomlands.

Chota was the epitome of what the Cherokee called a white or peace town, which set it apart from those communities where red, or war-centered, town councils were held. In the years of swiftly shifting diplomacy between 1755 and 1778, Chota assumed an almost mystical influence over the Little Tennessee Valley as well as the wider network of Cherokee subtribes. And Chota also served as the ultimate "town of refuge," where fugitives, who faced strangulation under the tribe's stern legal code, raced for safety. Once inside her walls, where no blood could be shed, fugitives and guilty parties worked to "wipe away their victim's tears" and win pardon. Later in the eighteenth century, as this landscape darkened with Cherokee, French, British and American blood, Grandmother's arms also took in

refugees from Lower and Middle Cherokee settlements in flight from the white invasion.

The security of the Cherokee civic realm spread from sacred fires. Considered genetic grafts from the sun, one burned in every town, lending light and purity to pomp and ceremony. To the Cherokee, their ritual fires were considered "human in thought, consciousness, intent, emotions," and a virtual "grandmother in kin terms." In the old days, Cherokee warriors carried coals from their sacred fires into battle and brought them in gunnysacks to their ball games. Into their flames they fed Indian tobacco, deer-tongue offerings and the season's first fruits. Fire was the medium of transformation, turning offerings into gifts for spiritual intercessors or the four quarters of the earth. And when their coals cooled off, fires left behind the symbols of charred blackness and death, along with the ashen whiteness associated with peace and the power of elders.

As one Eastern Cherokee told anthropologist Frank G. Speck, "Proper treatment of the fire was essential to the well-being of the family, good family life, mannerly and proper conduct and many rules about the conduct of the earth contributed to the health, strength and magical power of the old woman. Putting out the fire on the last day and [maintaining the] ritual new fire during the Green Corn was essential, as was the proper sharing of meals by burnt offerings to the fire." Weather permitting, the sacred fires blazed outdoors, drawing the dispersed citizenry to Chota's ceremonial grounds for the Green Corn, Great Medicine and Reconciliation and other national festivals. When it turned cold or stormy, designated fire keepers kindled them inside the council houses and fed them with fagots from the seven sacred trees: beech, birch, hickory, locust, maple, oak and sourwood.

In the late eighteenth century, momentous debates and tough decision making revolved around these fires. Once word spread that Chota had usurped Tenasi as the political hub of the Overhill Cherokee, a stream of white visitors—traders, missionaries, land speculators and diplomats representing England, France and the United States—arrived by boat and horseback, bearing overt and hidden agendas. Emissaries from the Mohawk, Ottawa and Shawnee nations bent their heads under the hollowed-log

doorway of Chota's council house. Within the seven-sided interior, with deep-tiered seating to accommodate upward of five hundred guests, they displayed nine-foot-long belts of purple and white shell beads in their attempts to rally multitribal crusades against American homesteaders.

Chota relished its rising prestige. The walls of its council house glowed like pewter from a clay slip tinted with pulverized oyster shells. Civic officials, male and female, painted their faces and held swan-wing fans of office to greet visitors before sitting down to business. Prominent guests were feasted and regaled with Eagle Tail dances in the town plaza. Banners rippled from tall poles before its entryway; the flags of foreign representatives were raised whenever they were in town. In other Overhill Cherokee settlements, symbols of whiteness and redness would alternate, depending upon the shifting intrigues of international politics. Those displayed at Chota, however, were exclusively white. But when war was on Chota's docket, a military standard was erected outside the council house, and its interior posts were daubed red and black.

Outsiders were taken aback by the authority wielded by Chota's women. During the eighteenth century, seven so-called Beloved Women as well as War Women were assigned seating in the town house. Prominent among them was *Ghighau,* the "Supreme Beloved Woman," who, with a wave of her trumpeter-swan wing, pardoned condemned murderers and resolved disputes.

When the Reverend William Richardson entered Chota's council house on December 29, 1758, he wanted permission to hold Bible classes for the Indians. Over the months that Richardson rented one of Chota's cabins, he saw how its councils provided equal time for Beloved Women and Beloved Men. As Richardson made his case, the tribe's treasurer, Old Hop, sat to his right; two seats away was the famous Attakullakulla, "prince" of Chota, while five down the bench was Oconostota, the town's renowned "Great Warrior." But Richardson did not keep his seat for long. Once the Indians heard what was on his mind, they asked him and his religion to leave town.

Three years later another young colonist sat in Chota's bleachers. Hoping to strengthen Cherokee ties to Virginia, Lieutenant Henry Timberlake also

took up temporary quarters in their "metropolis," spending hours in the same council house. To appreciate his mission, one must backtrack a bit. For nearly a century by then, the Lower, Middle and Overhill Cherokee divisions had bought into the white man's economic and political system. The imported goods that began as conveniences had now become necessities: axes, knives, hoes, rifles, black power and shot—and rum. As the Little Tennessee Valley became the focus of heated diplomacy, England won over most towns belonging to the Lower and Middle Cherokee towns; only the Overhills kept straddling the fence.

At the same time, the export of Indian-killed and tanned deerskin rose in numbers. Twenty years before Timberlake's mission, Cherokee porters were hauling fifty thousand hides a year across the Tellico Plains, through the Blue Ridge, to North Carolina and the coast. Then the Deer beings retaliated: between 1738 and 1739, a devastating smallpox epidemic wiped out half the Cherokee Nation, and the disease struck soon again. Many Cherokee healers died; others, their cures proven ineffective, committed suicide.

By the time Chota assumed supremacy of the Overhill region in 1753, it was a refugee depot for the scarred and displaced. On September 14, 1757, the Cross of St. George was unfurled at Chota's square during the annual Green Corn Dance; soon nearly seven hundred Cherokee warriors were fighting for the British against the upstart colonies. Declaring war on the tribe two years later, in campaigns against the Lower and Middle Cherokee towns, American soldiers from the Carolinas and Virginia burned their cottages and cornfields. More refugees fled over the mountains to join their Overhill kinfolk. And it was to halt these hostilities that Timberlake found himself in Chota's town house.

But his visit was too little too late. Unlike most of her sister Overhill towns, which strove for neutrality during the War for Independence, and despite their flirtation with the English, for the most part Chota remained partial to the Americans. But that alliance was ignored as the revolutionaries gained the upper hand and American reprisals against all presumed Crown sympathizers began. Indian town houses were burned, livestock were driven off or slaughtered, the Cherokee were killed and scalped or enslaved. Real estate speculators and immigrants, hearing that Overhill bot-

tomlands were "equal to manure itself," looked greedily over the Blue Ridge. Despite a last-ditch attempt by the Cherokee to draw the line at Waya Gap in the Nantahala Mountains, the American juggernaut broke through, and William Christian's Virginia troops spilled into Overhill territory.

At first Chota was spared. But when the first treaties with the new republic failed to hold, the winter of 1780–81 saw the Americans tear across the Little Tennessee Valley. Ten of the Overhill Cherokee towns were leveled, and Chota's luck finally ran out. On December 28, 1780, ragtag mountaineers breached the town of refuge. Sweeping aside the Beloved Woman's appeals for mercy, they kicked apart her sacred fire and torched the council house. For a number of years, it was as if only the force of Chota's longevity kept hope flickering; Indian holdouts even had the temerity to complain to North Carolina's governor about white homesteads creeping to "within a day's walk" of town.

But by 1788, when old Chief Oconostota was laid in the burial mound that would be exhumed by archaeologists two centuries later, Chota was on its last legs. After the death of Old Tassell, its chieftaincy was taken up by Hanging Maw. Now the Cherokee capital officially shifted to the southeast, to Ustanali, along the Coosawattee River in northern Georgia. Exhausted from a century of fighting, disease and land grabs, most of Chota's occupants gravitated toward the new population center known as New Echota.

While still resisting the move, Hanging Maw accepted President George Washington's invitation to talk it over in old Chota. The conference was a trap. Fifteen Cherokee leaders, including Hanging Maw's own wife, were caught by surprise and shot to death. Now it was within the American blockhouse at Tellico that subdued Indians and U.S. representatives wrapped up what business remained.

By 1799, Chota was practically a ghost town. Five dwellings were occupied by lingerers like Old Bark, who clung to his 640 acres until 1819, and Toqua Will, who begged the Tennessee legislature to let him die in old Chota because "his long residence there caused him to esteem it as his appropriate home for life," explained his lawyer. "He felt as if the very land were akin to him. It contained the remains of the mother of his children, and some of them also."

As for Cherokee refugees putting down new roots in northern Georgia, their hopes for permanent homes dimmed after 1815, when a Cherokee boy discovered yellow mineral in the Chestatee River. Georgians did not realize the extent of the gold in their backyard until 1827, but they made up for lost time. New state laws opened up the resettled Cherokee lands and forbade Indians from resisting property seizures. When President Jackson assumed the presidency in 1829, he supported southern whites who called for wholesale removal of Southeastern Indians west of the Mississippi.

This removal trauma split the Cherokee people into western and eastern bands. Of the estimated sixteen thousand who were rounded up in stockades, marched west under armed guard and resettled in the broken country of eastern Oklahoma, perhaps a quarter died from brutality, exposure, disease and heartbreak. The smaller number who avoided the round up became the Eastern Cherokee of North Carolina's Qualla Reservation. The Overhills were divided between relocatees in Indian Territory and families who stayed put in the Great Smokey hamlets of Wolftown, Birdtown and Snowbird. Many became Christians and remythologized their landscape, comparing baptisms in the river to the old "going to the water" rituals and accepting the redefinition of their dark mountains as the Devil's abode.

But older sympathies persisted. "We wondered why white people don't hear strange things and see things like Indians do," an Eastern Cherokee told a white scholar in 1959. To still hear those strange things, some continued to ride wagons over the high passes and into the Little Tennessee Valley. When the great-granddaughter of the Cherokee leader John Ross was a girl in the 1880s, she visited her grandparents there. Not far from the site of old Chota, she came upon them camped at the mouth of Citico Creek, sleeping on brush mats in a lean-to that was roofed with split cane. She played in cornfields that white farmers cultivated on the Citico town house mound, and picked old Indian beads out of the mud for her grandmother to string into necklaces.

They often arrived in Model Ts and pickups, and these informal visitations continued into the twentieth century. Cherokee parents showed their kids the sites of old Tenasi and Chota, left offerings at the Nikwasi

Mound near Franklin, and scoured the brush for medicinal plants they could find nowhere else. Another old Indian who visited the valley recalled, "The first time I came here I felt as though I'd seen it before. I had heard my grandmother and other Indians describe it. 'Beautiful Chota,' they called it."

After 1900, aluminum mining interests penetrated the central Appalachians. In the 1930s, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), seeking affordable electricity and flood control for neglected backwaters of rural America, instituted a public works program whose likes the world had never seen. Between George and Knoxville alone, eighteen dams went up. A facility for the Little Tennessee River was on the wish list of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but World War II cut that short. For two decades the corps did not reset its sights on the river. In 1966, however, the U.S. Congress approved more than $111 million and soon the TVA began condemning lots and buying out farmers. The Fort Loudon dam was to be built at the junction of the "Li'l T" and the Tennessee River, near Lenoir City.

But flood control and two hundred million kilowatts of electricity for an estimated twenty thousand households along the way were no longer its driving purpose. Now its selling points were the flatwater recreation industry, which required stocked fish, boat pull-outs and slips, camping and RV grounds and shoreline housing. An estimated 16,500 acres would go under, with an additional 22,000 acres adjacent to the new lake's shoreline designated for support services.

The trapped waters would rise into the woods for thirty-three miles along the Little Tennessee's main stem and twenty-two miles up its tributary, the Tellico, obliterating ten thousand years of Indian heritage and culture and the sites of momentous events in North America's colonial history. To some Cherokee it struck closer to home. "If the water covers Chota and the other sacred places of the Cherokee," testified Ammoneta Sequoyah, a seventy-eight-year-old Cherokee herbalist, "I will lose my knowledge of medicine. If the lands are flooded, the medicine that comes from Chota will be ended because the strength and spiritual power of the Cherokee will be destroyed." Another elder remembered a medicine man

who stood on a hickory stump around 1910 and envisioned the Little Tennessee choked with water. "Our forefathers would be on the bottom of the valley looking up through a wall of glass," he said. Tears rolled down his cheeks when he added, "One day the people would once again be put to the test of holding on to that which is sacred or giving up forever another part of our lives."

Environmentalists also went on the offense. At the location of old Chota, a delegation of Eastern Cherokee stuck a Plains Indian war bonnet on U.S. Supreme Court's William O. Douglas, a prominent spokesman for wilderness protection. From a rowboat in the Little Tennessee, the white-haired justice was photographed casting for trout, preparing his article against the dam, which had been commissioned by *National Geographic.* But TVA authorities persuaded the magazine to shelve his piece. Of foremost concern to Douglas were losses to outdoor recreation. "The lake resulting from the dam will forever ruin the "Little T" as Tennessee's finest trout river and as a picturesque free-flowing river enjoyed by canoeists," Douglas wrote, "and a host of others seeking an escape to an unspoiled natural setting." Only at the end of his piece did the dam's threat to Indian culture and history seem to sink in: "There were Cherokee towns near the mouth of the Little T to its headwaters . . . places as revered to them as Williamsburg and Plymouth Rock are to us."

On the heels of surveyors bent over transits and hard-hatted engineers carrying clipboards arrived bulldozers, dump trucks and cement mixers. Archaeologists from the University of Tennessee were given less than fourteen years to read the human history of a watershed that had begun with the Ice Age. Aided by eighteenth-century maps, they were keen to uncover about a dozen Overhill Cherokee towns, such as Toqua, Tomotley and, of course, Chota. For a while the valley featured a race: dam construction versus archaeological excavation.

Near the site of Chota they identified the very bones of its Great Warrior. Although Oconostota's final years were spent away from home, shortly before his death in 1783 he'd asked to be returned there. To ready him for the Cherokee afterlife, his corpse was laid in a dugout canoe, white beads wrapped around his right shoulder, an iron knife and a pair of eyeglasses laid alongside his right leg.

His grave was among more than three hundred other sites discovered in the late 1970s, as archaeologists worked with a haste usually abhorred by their profession. In the most ambitious salvage operation ever attempted east of the Mississippi, they backhoed deep trenches to reveal nine successively occupied river terraces. The Cherokee were only the valley's most recent native occupants, possibly entering the Little Tennessee from the north just a thousand years ago, but probably sharing with their predecessors their customs—burials in earthworks, social hierarchy, belief in sacred fires. Archaeologists worked down through dancing and ball-playing grounds that were paved with cobblestones. They cut into deeper layers of fire-and-grease-hardened house floors and refuse dumps. Farther down they unearthed chunks of charcoal associated with Indian cultures that predated the Cherokee by millennia.

Only a dozen miles downstream from Chota, for instance, lay the site named Icehouse Bottom. From a fifteen-foot pit, Dr. Jeffrey Chapman extracted burned remains from campfires kindled by Indians nearly ten thousand years ago. Since this silty deposit lay well below water level, Icehouse preserved the walnuts and butternuts that were side dishes to a mastodon main course. A nearby chert quarry, good for chipping into grooved projectile points, helped explain the location's long popularity. In lower strata, Chapman found evidence of women's work: the clay imprint of a vegetable-fibered textile that was dated at more than nine thousand years of age, our earliest evidence for weaving in the Southeast. Nor was Icehouse an isolated community—Chapman also turned up mica from North Carolina and stone blades from Flint Ridge, Ohio, which were evidence of a wide trade network.

Then environmentalists, archaeologists and Indians got a break. Biologists alerted them that a three-inch fish, known as the snail darter, bred only along the Little Tennessee; the Cherokee knew it as *dugalvina*, whose long nose they likened to the neck of a gourd. The threat to its survival drew national attention, initiated the Endangered Species Act of 1973 and delayed the closing of the dam's floodgates. The snail darter snag dragged on for five years, until the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with government

experts that the little fish could be found in other streams, and the dam was on track again.

With environmentalists peeling off, the Indians were on their own. One year after the Supreme Court's decision, a coalition of Eastern and Western Cherokee, as well as three Cherokee individuals acting on their own, moved the issue into the legal arena, citing the recently signed American Indian Religious Freedom Act. The Tellico Dam threatened their "resettlement sites, cemeteries, rich farmland, forests and the river itself," testified Eastern Cherokee Jimmie Durham. "Our connection with the Great Spirit" would be broken, maintained plaintiff Richard Crowe, who recalled his parents using the phrase *diga tale nohr,* for the Little Tennessee region, which meant, "This is where we began." And Crowe warned, "If they are flooded, our spiritual strength from our forefathers would be taken from us, along with the origin of our organized religion." And another Indian witness, Robert Blankenship, stressed that the land and river were sacred "because they are the only tangible items left for me and other Cherokee to worship."

Lawyers for the Cherokee tried to build on the legal victory of Wisconsin's Amish community in the early 1970s. When that case had reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the justices accepted the argument that Amish resistance to the state's compulsory education laws was "rooted in religious belief" and not a matter of "lifestyle preferences." Government interests were not compelling enough to outweigh those of the Amish in their First Amendment appeal to freedom of religion. Unmentioned, of course, was the fact that as Christian pioneers, the Amish sect had been allowed to stick together for more than two centuries as separate, self-educating, self-sufficient religious communities. Along with the Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, the Cherokee legal team saw this precedent as their last weapon against TVA.

District Court Judge Robert L. Taylor took two months to mull over the Cherokee plea for the valley's stay of execution. When he turned them down in 1980, he highlighted the division between secular and sacred claims by questioning whether the Cherokee were fearing the loss of a cultural heritage *or* their religious rights. When Cherokee visited the area, he be-

lieved, most were not there for religious purposes but were "prompted for the most part by an understandable desire to learn more about their cultural heritage."

Taylor's distinction between ways of life and ways of belief drew from the Religious Freedom Act's stipulation that sacred sites had to be "central" to a living religion. Taylor was not persuaded that these thirty-three miles of the Little Tennessee watershed were "central, inseparable, and indispensable" to the Cherokee. Cultural history and tradition may be "totally important to any group of people," he wrote, but they were "not protected by the Free Exercise Claim of the First Amendment."

The Tellico case was the first legal fight over American Indian sacred geography to divorce history and culture from religion. The Religious Freedom Act's criteria of "centrality" and "indispensability" were borrowed from the famous historian of religions Mircea Eliade, who sought to champion what he termed "primal religions" like those of the Cherokee. But in this case they proved too high and too general a standard.

Under the old Overhill Cherokee legal code, invading or "polluting" a sacred place was considered the equivalent of assaulting or merely touching a "peace priest." Whereas punishment was whipping or death for serious offenses, for violations of sacred places the spirits themselves executed the guilty, but at an "uncertain date or manner." But no one cited the consequences of old Indian laws when, on November 29, 1979, even before the Supreme Court delivered its verdict, the floodgates at Tellico Dam were shut. Foot by foot and hour by hour, the river sites went under. The river became a lake; as an ecological and cultural entity, the valley died within the next six weeks.

I wanted to see the Chota memorial in daylight and returned in late afternoon, a few weeks before the hemlocks leafed out. As an evocation of the landscape sensibilities that had nurtured the Overhill Cherokee belief system, the jetty's design failed. Perhaps an improvement over concrete riprap, its breakwater of dumped rock was too impersonal and defensive. Around the reservoir, where pooling undercut the limestone bedrock, few mossy banks invited one to daydream or stick feet into refreshing waters. The shoreline looked readier to drown you than befriend you.

Meant to symbolize the pine logs that once supported Chota's council house, truncated concrete pillars were hacked off and pitted from the cardboard tubing into which their wet concrete had been poured. An eye-shaped basin was a halfhearted attempt to symbolize a hearth that had warmed Cherokee souls three hundred years before. It was filled with dry gravel. The effect was invasive and industrial, more fitting as self-congratulation for the destruction of the Cherokee capital, the banishment of its people and the construction of Tellico Dam than as homage to a banished Cherokee presence. One longed for a more organic commemoration, for earthier metaphors to conjure up a profusion of wild plants in the mountains and an unencumbered river and smoke from a sacred fire.

Driving north and upstream, past the turnoff to the old town of Toqua and toward Fort Loudon, I pulled into the old Tenasi monument, where Chota's neighbor town and the state's namesake once stood. Now it was a perfunctory turnabout with minimal information on a small sign. My plan was a quiet pilgrimage to all the Overhill sites, but then reality intruded.

Guns and bloodshed may have been banned from eighteenth-century Chota, yet on every road shoulder were trucks with shortwave antennae whipping around and huddles of barking hounds. Groups of men in camouflage and greasepaint stomped out of the trees, shotguns bouncing on their shoulders and knife sheaths and .45 automatics swinging from their belts. They eyed my candy-red rental with undisguised condescension. Gunfire boomed through the woods. It was dusk on the last day of rabbit season, but it resembled a paramilitary takeover.

As I paid my respects at Oconostota's headstone, erected over his reburied bones, it was hard not to sympathize with the old man's lament, recorded in July 1769: "The whole nation is filling with hunters," he had said, "and the guns rattling every way on the path, both up and down the river. They have settled the land a great way this side of the line."

I headed for the Knoxville airport without any more stops.